Monochrome: Shrine of the Fallen

Six frail mortals stared out at the Shrine of the Grey in the distance, and plotted the fall of the alien god that lay crouched in the shrine. Between the six and their intended destination lay a vast wasteland that once had been City. Now, the sky burned orange with clouds like borax hissing on the surface of a sulphurous lake. Black smoke from burning fuel boiled up from the earth and the wreckage of the dying Golden Age of Man. Riza took a deep breath to clear her head, took in too much of the chemical fumes and coughed loudly into the silence. The group froze, and watched for signs of the enemy, or worse, the Stillborn.

Nothing moved, and Riza sighed in relief. Striker nodded, "Get ready to move folks. This is all going to sound cliche, but we only get one shot at this, so make it count. We die, it's all over."

Everyone nodded, and Riza looked around at the little group she found herself preparing to probably die beside in battle.

Striker was in charge of their group. Riza didn't know Striker's first name. She carried herself with the bearing of a pre-industrial Military Officer, and claimed to be a retired drill sergeant. she had large grey eyes; and thick straight hair of the same color, which she wore long and tied back in a pony-tail. She was tall and of a heavier build suggesting that she had not maintained his fitness to the same standard of her previous profession. She dressed in drab blues and greys.

"You seem as though you're dressing to disappear," Riza noted.

To this Striker nodded, but did not answer. Riza looked at Corvo, Striker's second in command and husband. Corvo was not of Caucasian descent like her wife, but Riza could not precisely place the man's background. He was thin and moved like a dancer. he had almond eyes of an icy blue, and thick curly hair of a platinum blonde that was clearly artificial. Riza could see the unbleached roots showing. Unlike his wife, Corvo dressed in a fitted suit of a light blue, complete with a white shirt and a white silk tie.

Riza shook her head, "How in the name of the Weaver have you kept that suit clean since the Fall?" She asked.

Corvo provided a cold joyless smile, "I've had to kill a few people for stain remover on occasion."

"Is that a joke?"

"If you like."

The next two members of team had been introduced to Riza as Striker and Corvo's children: Their son Cotton and their Daughter Dolf. Fraternal twins, the young guerilla's looked quite similar although Riza would not have guessed that they were twins. They both had black hair and grey-blue eyes. Dolf wore her hair is a lazyhawk with pink tips, while Cotton wore his long and in a single braid down his back. Cotton was big and broad, built like his mother. Dolf was tall and willow slim like her father. Both dressed in a style that seems half guerilla and half punk rock, post-apocalyptic as designed by pop-culture. The twins looked at her.

"You sure you to pull this off?" Cotton asked.

Riza considered the question. She was not sure. She knew the rituals required, but had never enacted them- how could she? The Grey was singular, and so she and Felix had never had an opportunity to practise the ritual beyond recitation and rote memorization. Further, The Grey was inestimably powerful, and could perhaps throw off or simply ignore the effects of the ritual. The Grey couldn't been killed by beings as small as humans.

Before she finished considering, Felix answered, "Of course we can. It takes two, but we're good. We're really good," He grinned a flawless smile at the two teenagers, "Riza could probably do it alone if need be."

Cotton smiled, "Couldn't you?"

Felix shook his head, still smiling, "The key part of the ritual requires a woman to enact it. We aren't sure if it's a psychic thing or a chromosome thing or maybe both, magic is annoying that way. But I can do a bunch of grunt work on the ritual, she's the one who has to put it into place. The psychic load is insane though. Even with two of us sharing the load, we're both going to get nose bleeds and there's the distinct chance either of us might go blind or take some brain damage."

Riza nodded along with what he was saying. Felix still looked amazing, she noted. He stood six foot tall, slim but muscular and toned, with sharp green eyes and naturally perfect blond hair with impossible movie star stylish messiness. He was wearing a red tank top and combat fatigues, with a pair of sunglasses hanging from the neck of his shirt.

Felix continued, "This, of course, is assuming the little princeling can get us in the Shrine in the first place."

Riza turned to look at Max, the young man sighed and nodded, "The troops aren't going to recognize my authority. But it's a good bet the father wants me taken alive. So that will work in our favor. And, yeah, I can get us in. The Shrine doesn't run on any technology, pure old Imperial magic. And the Shrine responds to the blood of the Royal line, so it can't help but let us in." Max was quiet a moment, and then pointed to himself and then Riza, "So that means myself and the Voodoo Queen there are mission critical assets. We die and it's all over."

Striker nodded, "We will keep you alive, at least long enough to do your parts. This will be more likely to succeed, if everyone reconiles themselves to the idea that we are going to die."

Dolf shook her head, "Screw that Mom, I'm going to live."

Cotton added, "I mean, we might not die."

Corvo nodded, "We might, but we are more likely to not die if we commit ourselves to success at the expense of our own lives. Hesitating will kill us. You need to set aside your own lives and forget that keeping them is an option. If, when this is over, we're still alive, then it will be a nice surprise."

"Aren't you guys just a gaggle of rainbows and sunshine." Max said quietly.

"You dad has fed the rainbows and sunshine to his giant demon snake and fed all the hope to his monster god." Felix said.

"Yes," Max said with a long sigh, "I am, in fact, aware of that. That is why I'm preparing to make a suicide charge on the Shrine with a family of Conspiracy Nuts and a pair of Pop-Magick Voodoo Shaman wannabes. Keep in mind, I could be ruling this whole thing. And I'm choosing to wade through boiling salt and burning glass to oppose my father."

"Okay, fine. My mistake." Felix answered.

"No, not a mistake," Max said, "But know this. I understand his crimes. That's why I'm here. You guys are preparing for the possibility of death. I'm not."

"I died the day that I abdicated. I died the day I walked away from the throne. And I died again when Maia," He paused, "blood on the asphalt. Do you know how many Witchdoctors died trying to save her?"

"And they failed. We failed. We all failed. So this is it. I'm already dead. He's already dead. I'm trying to stop his corpse from killing even more people in its frantic death throes."

Striker held up a hand, "We've got Stillborn. Your dramatic monologue will have to wait. Now everybody move. Mission Criticals in the center. Be ready to kill, and don't be afraid to die. Now, Go!"

Lightning cracked in the distance, and Riza tasted ozone as she licked chapped lips nervously. The earth had been baked dry and blasted to a colorless white chalk that cracked under foot like dry ice. plumes of white powder puffed up with each foot fall and the taste of chemical and salt hung in the air.

The land was festooned with the littered remains of the Golden Age, rusted hulks of now imobile cars and trucks, war machines and combine harvesters, mini malls and recruiting stations. The oxidizing orange rust leaching into the salt and chalk, bleeding across a bleached white landscape.

Striker Led the way, carrying a large rifle with two magazines and two barrels. Riza did not recognize the weapon, but guns were not her specialty. She carried a shotgun, Felix had explained the type and name and such, but she had forgotten it. She did know that the weapon worked by a pump action, and that Felix had loaded deer slugs into the weapon. Riza could load the weapon herself and could clear a jam, if the malfunction were not complicated, but she had chosen a different weapon as her specialty.

Behind Striker, Felix walked inside a perimeter created by his four hovering Grasshopper drones, each about the size of a large hawk. The Grasshoppers used a weapon based in some way on focused light pulses. The Opponent had to see the pulses, But once this happened, the target's nervous system would have a reaction not unlike an epelectic seizure. The Grasshoppers also came equipped with pneumatic injetor blades, generally coated with neurotoxin, but also typically lethal on their own. And Felix carried both a small submachine gun and a pistol to deal with those opponents with whom the Grasshopper's could not.

Max and Riza came next. Riza noted that Max carried only a Shock Saber, although an incredibly well made one. Combined with the incredibly well fitted and expensive clothes that Max still wore, the Saber made the young man look as though he had stepped out of a tale of Epic Romantic Adventure, all riding boots and shoulder epaulets. He wasn't handsome, Riza noticed, his nose was too prominant and his

eyes a little to widely spaced and intense; but he was intensely striking. And, Riza found herself unable to avoid noticing, the exiled prince had a gorgeous rear end in those tight fitted pants. She looked away to avoid blushing.

The Twins walked behind Max, both carrying weapons that seemed built out of the corpses of many other weapons. And their father followed in rearguard position, carrying only a sniper rifle visibly, although Riza had previously seen the man produce holdout derringers from both sleeves to the deadly surprise of several border guards.

Ahead of them lay a pack of feral Stillborn, tearing apart the remains of a Scavenger Clan Wagon train. The Stillborn stood and crouched some two hundred yards from the group as they moved. From this distance Riza might have mistaken them for humans, had she not known better. The Stillborn hadn't been human for some time. Their white and chalky skin blended into the blasted landscape. And skin cells erupted from their bodies when they moved, not unlike the chalk that burst forth from the earth when Riza trod on it. She could not see the Stillborn's trademark milk white eyes from this distance, but could see the bleached iredescent hair that floated as though weightless above their skulls.

The Stillborn were not silent, and even from this distance, Riza could hear the Stillborn chattering to each other loudly in the strange way that they did. The Stillborn seemed to understand each other, but Riza had never known any human who could understand them. The sound of their speech was not unlike attempts at backmasking a heavy metal album.

"They haven't seen us," Striker noted, "We'll swing around them. Avoid them while distracted by their hunger."

"They're always distracted by their hunger," Felix added, "That's the problem."

"As long as they aren't aiming their hunger at us." Max hissed as the group moved quietly from cover to cover.

Riza tried not to listen to the sounds of tearing flesh and the occasional scream of a body that had turned out to not be quite dead yet when the Stillborn in question started devouring its flesh. They Slipped past the Stillborn under the cover of the sounds of violence and gluttony echoing from the wreck.

As the group finally put the pack of feral Stillborn behind them, Riza heard Cotton whisper to Dolf, "Maybe we'll get lucky and not see any actual Wendigo."

"Don't say that!" Dolf answered in a loud insistent whisper, "You want to invoke it? So the story feels it has to drop full on Hungry Ghosts on us?"

"Worse," Riza said, pointing to the broad stretch of open ground between the pile of wrecked anti-personnel carriers the group was huddled behind and the Shrine of the Grey.

A great mass of Stillborn stood between the group and the Shrine. Maybe two or three hundred, if Riza was counting the groups correctly. And that was the scary part.

These were not feral Stillborn dressed in rags and blood stains, these wore the uniforms of the Stillborn Army: The Last King's elite shock troops, well trained cannibal spirits made from dark magic and and rituals probably best left unknown. Standing, more or less in military formation and carrying the most advanced weapons a Stillborn could be trusted to use, cavalry sabers and Spears.

Once the Stillborn were human. Now they were hungry.

"Put me in the front," Max said into the silence, "They won't fight to kill me. It will buy us space."

Striker shook her head, "The humans holding the leashes won't fight to kill you. The Stillborn won't care. You can't control the Stillborn, only aim them."

Corvo nodded, "And all you've got is that glorified taser." he pointed at Max's scabard and the saber resting in it.

"The Stillborn army does follow orders to a certain extent, they'll hesitate. We can't fight three hundred Wendigo, fully developed or not- they'll tear us apart in a straight fight."

"If they've not been fed recently," Striker objected, "Those Stillborn won't even hear the orders."

Riza raised her index finger, "If there is evena sliver of hesitation, I can enhance it. I can fan that flame and maybe even make a wave of resistance that we could use to punch through their lines."

Corvo pointed at Max, "Would boy king here need to still be front and center?"

Riza noddded, "Yeah, he would. I can't manufacture the feeling, only enhance it."

Felix shook his head and stared at Max, "You said so yourself. There are two people here who are Mission Critical. You and my wife."

"Ex-wife." Riza corrected.

Felix turned to her, "Are we doing this here?"

"No, we are not," Riza answered.

"Either way," Felix continued, "He's not expendible. We can't get in without him. And resurrection is not on my to do list today."

"Do you have another option with even a remote possibility of working?" Max asked.

Silence walked into the group's conversation and sat there for a long time while all six people listened to it.

Finally Felix spoke, "I can use the Grasshopers to widen the perimeter a bit, get them close to the Stillborn in a semi circle in front of us. The visual stun doesn't work as consistently on Stillborn as on humans, but they aren't full Wendigo so I should get some of them. Maybe most of the one in front."

"It's not going to be enough," Corvo said,"

"It will have to be," Max said and rounded the corner of their cover.

Riza watched in horrible fascination as Max stepped into the open, drew his saber and saluted, "I am Prince Maximillian Draconis Octavian IV, and I command all troops to stand down in the name of the Imperial House of Draconis!" And then he pointed the Saber forward and charged.

"Bloody Hell!" Riza cursed and dropped her backpack to the ground, "Well get out there and give him covering fire!" she yelled and began rummaging through the pack.

Striker and her children charged around the corner and Riza could hear gunfire the instant the three disappeared from view. Corvo brought his rifle up to his shoulder and leaned around the cover and began fire careful shots, one at a time. Felix was a few steps behind Striker and her children, frantically tapping

commands on the forearm interface for his drone. Riza continued digging through her pack, finally withdrawing a necklace made of bone beads, and a amulet crafted from a surveillance camera lens marked with the sign of the Weaver.

She raised the amulet and closed her eyes, reaching into the story and out towards Max and he charged down the field in a hail gunfire from the opposing officers and from his own team as three hundred cannibal things charged at him in military dress with swords and spears and claws and fangs. Riza traced the lines of the story emanating out from Max and foudn the one he had talked about, connecting him to the officers: fear of the repercussions of killing the Last King's only son. She focused that fear and then projected it, amplified out from Max like a tsunami or the pressure wave of an explosion.

In her mind's eye she saw the Stillborn Army shudder and stumble and begin to split as they flowed around the group under the influence of her magick. Riza quickly scrambled to her feet and charged around the wrecked Anti-personnel carrier and joined the mad dash to the Shrine. She noted that Corvo had joined her, the instant she had started running, and the he still had not stopped his steady firing pace, still unearingly dropping any hostile that seemed in danger of getting close to Max.

They parted the Stillborn Army, and as Max approached the line of Officers in front of the gate to the Shrine, they too began to shudder. One by one the Officers began to back away and give ground.

Finally all the officers had backa way save for one Officer who stood, kneed shaking, but saber drawn as Max approached at a run. Riza watched from the back of the pack as Max shifted his saber, apparently preparing to cross swords with the opposing Officer. She held her breath, both swordsmen cut.

And the Imperial Officer's head separated cleanly from his shoulders and his body fell to the ground. She looked back to to still running form of Max, and noticed a stumble as he approached the closed gate. He came to a staggering stop and then crumpled in a heap before the marble doors.

Awful omens curling like centipedes in the bottom of her guts, Riza struggled to catch up as, one by one, the rest of the group reached the door and the fallen form of Max.

"Check him," Striker ordered Felix and she and her family began laying down fire to hold off the now recovering hordes of Stillborn.

"The officers have fully lost control now," Corvo noted, he paused and looked into the distance, "And the feral pack has joined them. How is the foolish little aristocrat?"

"He's full cadaver. Dead as democracy." Felix said.

"Is there another way in?" Cotton asked.

"Not without more explosives that we have." Striker answered.

"Crap, I actually am going to have to resurrect the stupid little prince." Felix muttered, "Crap. Crap. Crap. Crap crap crap."

"Wait, you were serious?" Cotton asked, mouth wide.

"I was also serious about not wanting to do it. This could very well kill me. The psychic load on a resurrection, even one a fresh as this, is intense."

"We can do it," Riza said, putting a hand awkwardly on Felix's shoulder.

"No," he shook the hand off his shoulder, "No we can't. The psychic load to kill either one of us, even if we share the load. We can't save one Mission Critical person by killing the other one. I have to do this alone. Period." Felix pulled a small athame from a sheath and drew the knife blade across his palm in a swift movement. He placed the bleeding palm on Max's forehead drew a small cloth bag marked with the symbol of the firebird from a belt pouch.

"Felix, don't invoke the Firebird." Riza said as Felix closed his eyes. gooseflesh raced across Riza's skin as she felt the enormous burst of energy thrumming out from Felix. And then she felt the attention of the Grey turn slowly, like two slabs of granite sliding against each other. She could feel the mind's eye of the great alien god thing bearing down upon the group, taking them in, deciding what they were to it.

"The Grey knows we're here." She whispered.

Felix remained fixed on Max, who continued to remain stubbornly dead. The weight of the Grey's continued notice began to build, become a tangible thing that weighted Riza down, causing her to stumble to one knee.

"We've got its attention," She managed to gasp out and the psychic weigh drove the air from her lungs.

A shift in the psychic gravity around, caused Riza to stubmle towards Max and Felix. And Riza felt the vitality move from Felix into Max. She looked to see how much of life the process had left him. But, she couldn't actually see anything left in the vessel that had been her ex-husband as he toppled forward onto Max's body.

"Oof, What happened?" Max gasped as Felix's body landed head first on his stomache.

"Felix just poured his entire life force into you in order to drag you back from the Shadowlands." Riza answered, she pointd at the marbles doors, "Now open that door before you die again."

Max nodded and pushed himself out from under Felix, "Is he seriously dead? Did he die to save me?"

"Looks like," Dolf Said as she fired a smoke grenade from her monstrous looking gun.

"He might not be dead," Riza answered, "But he's close."

"We have company!" Striker announced, pointed to the now swarming mass of Stillborn. Riza noted that two of the Grasshoppers were down, and the other two were being forced back as they dodged the attacks of the advancing horde.

Corvo leaned down and pressed two fingers to Felix's throat, "No pulse. I'd say dead, I'm afraid."

"This isn't your area, this is mine!" Riza hissed, "He might still be alive. Max, get the door open!

She stepped forward and dragged her ex-husband's limp and heavy body up into a fireman's carry as Max pressed an open palm into the center plate on the door marked with the Imperial Sigil.

The door grated open. And the five of them, plus Felix's body, backed into the first room of the Shrine of the Grey.

Once Riza had managed to haul the still form of Felix through the gateway, Max pressed his hand against a plate inside the first chamber and the marble door slide closed again.

Riza struggled to set her load down gently, but the body tumbled off her shoulders more roughly than she had hoped. She stared at his blank eyes, open and staring into space, and then turned away.

"One down." Corvo said.

Riza spun back and opened her mouth, and then stopped and turned away again.

"This is what we're facing," Striker said, "More of us will die from here on in. Things will not get better. The Princeling is expendible now. We all are save for Riza."

"What's the point of saying this now?" Max answered, crossing his arms.

"We are defended here," Striker pointed out, "Only the royal family can open that door. If any of you don't feel up to continuing, we could just wait here. Wait until they give up and then sneak out. Let the Imperial Corpse be somebody else's problem. let the crazy alien god be somebody else's problem. This is our last chance to walk away."

"Mom," Cotton said, "Are you actually encouraging us to walk away?"

"Not encouraging, but if you aren't committed, you should quit. And this is the last chance to quit."

Nobody spoke, as Silence showed up again for a long visit. The painful lack of speech extended on and on. Riza lost track of time. Max paced back and forth. Striker checked her gear. The two teenagers stared at each other, seemingly willing the other to back down.

Nobody spoke.

Then, into the silence a weak cough, and then a voice.

"I really hope you aren't about to wimp out after my heroic sacrifice," Felix gasped weakly from the floor.

"Felix!" Riza gasped, "Next time you do that, I'm going to kill you!"

Felix chuckled, "Hypocritical humor later dear. We have a universe, and a story, to save. Come on people. We have to do this. No matter the sacrifice. This is our place in the story."

Striker nodded, "If a man can come back from the dead to tell us to fight on, I'm not going to argue. Anyone want to walk away?"

Max shook his head, and moved a hand to his now empty scabbard. He glanced at the scabbard in clear annoyance.

"No, I'm a dead man brough back to life and told mby my redeemer to fight on. I'm in this to the end."

"We're with you Mom, you know that." Cotton added, and Dolf nodded her assent.

Riza nodded, "The Grey knows were here now, it gets worse now, not better," she paused, "So be ready for anything."

Corvo pointed to Max, "So open the next gate Max, let's go meet our fate."

The interior of the Shrine was built from marble the color of the pallid skin of human albinos, wraught through with strange veins of blue and red, and seemed to thrum and throb. Riza touch a hand to a marble stature depicting one of the stillborn on its knees with arms outstretched to some unknown authority. She drew her hand back instinctively against the biting cold of the stone.

Riza and Max had to assist Felix in walking, as the resurrection had left him to weak to walk unassisted and neither of them were willing to leave him behind, despite his protests.

The interior of the Shrine seemed composed of a tangle of labyrinthine tunnels and chambers, some bridging over top of others, some leading to little sepulchres and dead ends, some leading back to previously walked passageways.

"This can't be normal," Striker said.

Corvo nodde, "Nobody could build a place like this. It defies existence."

"This is the story," Riza noted, "it can't be easy to find ones way through a labyrinth in any tale now can it? Even Theseus got lost."

"Theseus had a ball of string," Cotton observed, "You get through a labyrinth with a story hack. Where's ours?"

Max stopped an unremarkable passageway, causing Riza to pull up short to avoid droppinf Felix.

"Here," Max pointed, "This way."

"Why should we go that way rich boy?" Dolf asked.

"His name is Max," Corvo corrected, then, "But yes, why?"

"Because I can feel it. Something. Something cold and ancient is pulling me, in my guts. This way."

"Sounds like a trap," Dolf noted.

"Either way," Striker said, "It's better than wandering. We follow Max and his gut."

And so they did, twisting through pale skinned corridors of albino marble, lined with statues of terrifed Stillborn and Wendigo, knights of Unity and Purity both, and many other unpleasant metamorphic stone decorations. The hallways were dimly lit, though by what Riza had been unable to determine. The pale flickering light did not appear to have any visible source, it simply hung in the air, a photonic impossibility that left her unsettled even more than the cold stone and yet pulsing living walls already had done. Finally Max directed them through three short turns in quick succession that Riza would have sworn took them back upon their own path at least twice before they found themselves in a sort of anti-chamber before a broad open arched and pillared doorway leading into what was clearly an inner sanctum of sorts.

Ahead of them stood half a dozen figures, four tall thin men in white priestly robes with high red and gold collars of the senior priesthood. And two knights of Unity in their white gold and red ceremonial armor, a strange anachronistic mix of Medieval knight and SWAT team.

They were all male and seemed of indeterminant age, with faces that seemed designed to be nondescript and unremarkable. They were all smiling broadly. Riza did not like the smiles.

"Wayward Prince and honoured guests," The lead priest said, "We regret that the Inner Sanctum is off limits and you must turn back."

Striker smiled, "You think you're going to talk us down? At this point? Everything has fallen. The world is in ruins. What do you think you're going to accomplish here?"

"I could ask the same question? Do you actually think to harm our Lord, the last Unborn Elder, the Ancient child?"

"Move aside, and you might get out of this alive," Striker said.

"You do seek our lord harm," The lead priest said.

"Move aside or be moved," Striker said.

"Something is wrong," Felix muttered, " I don't have the, I can't do anything like this."

Riza nodded and reached to belt, drawing out the camera lens amulet. She focused on Felix's insight and began to amplify it, and then extend it out to encompass first the group and then the priests. As she did, The appearance the priests crumbled like masks made of sand. Their eye sockets now sat empty, their lips had vanished and the smiles now grinned with a cadaverous gaping smile full of too large teeth. The skin stretched tight across high cheekbones and polished foreheads. Riza noted that the two knights seemed to still be human, but now appeared bear normal features and not the weird non-descript look they had previous possessed.

"The meat can see us." one of the priests noted.

"Then let us help our lord see them," The lead priest answered, and all of the priests raised their arms in unison to the roof.

The ambient and sourceless light suddenly focused around Dolf, moving from other parts of the room, leaving those areas in darkness as Dolf herself was suffused in a sudden spotlight. The priests vanished into the sudden darkness.

"Dolf, move for cover!" Striker yelled.

Dolf tensed as though about to take evasive action, but then froze in place, as sudden snapshot of herself. Color leeched from her form, and her body acquired a strange sense of weight. And suddenly Riza realized that she was looking at a marble statue of Dolf and not the teenaged girl herself any longer. The whole process had taken the time it took Riza to draw a breath in alarm.

A gunshot rang out in the darkness, muzzle flash back and to Riza's left. The lights burst out from their spotlight and scattered like startled fireflies. And in the frantic moving lights, Riza saw the lead priest falling to the ground, a gaping hole in the center of his forehead. She looked back and saw Corvo reloading his rifle.

"That was my daughter," He said without raising his voice.

Another priest rushed at Corvo and the sniper shattered his rifle across the Priest's face, scope exploding in a shattering of glass and cylinders. Corvo tossed his rifle aside and began reaching for something else, presumably a back up weapon, when a third priest slammed into Corvo and grappled the sniper in a bear hug.

"You are not neat and orderly," The Priest snarled as the two struggled, "I do not think you can be put in order as is. You are only useful to our lord as resources, as parts."

Corvo grunted and then dropped his weight and widened his stance, and then quickly flipped the priest to the ground with a hip throw. As he did, Riza noticed bits of something rising on Corvo. The lights against coelesced, this time upon Corvo and the priest. Corvo ignored the sudden spotlight, and simply began hammering fists methodically into the priest's face, like flesh and bone jack hammers. The bits floating up from Corvo began to get larger and Riza belatedly realized that they were bits of Corvo. He was being disassembled in some way, taken apart piece by piece. Corvo ignored this and continued to rain blows upon the priest until its skull had shattered and lay in pieces beneath the pale skin of the face. The process of disassembly continued as well, and by the time the priest lay still there was precious little left of Corvo. And after another second there was nothing at all.

And again the lights moved, drifting apart this time in apparent disinterest.

The two knights had been carrying spears. They looked at each other, apparently assessing the situation, and both released their grip upon their respective spears- hands moving for firearms holstered on their hips.

Striker raised her gun and fired two rounds quickly into the face of the Guardsman on the left. As his helmet and face distorted from the impact, she fired twice more into his chest. The guardsman had not yet reached his gun as he died, crumpling to the ground still unarmed.

Riza saw Cotton raising his own thuggish scavenger-made firearm and firing what Riza guessed was a shotgun round, probably buckshot into the other Guardsman's face. The effect on the man's face was not pretty and Riza looked away. As she did she noticed the remaining Priest standing over a pit or well in the corner than she had not noticed. He had slit open his wrist and was getting readdy to drip blood down the hole.

"Ritual!" She cried out, "Stop him!"

Striker and Cotton turned towards the priest, but Felix had already spotted the same thing as Riza. He had drawn his athame and threw the ceremonial knife overhand at the priest, the motion causing him to lose his balance and stumble to the ground, dragging Max and Riza down with him. Riza heard a gasp and a gurgle. She looked up to see that Felix had managed to hit the priest just beside the nose, the blade appearing to have penetrated the right eye socket.

The priest stumbled and then to Riza's horror, he fell into the well, disappearing ing a whirl of white cloth.

"I'm not getting that back," Felix gasped with a strained smile.

"If he made a connection, whatever he did is going to activate with an offering of his whole bloody life force." Riza pointed out, then stopped and stared at Felix, "When did your hair go grey?"

Felix ran a hand through his silvered hair, "Is it grey? That's probably from bringing Max back across the line."

Riza calculated in her mind, then nodded, "That's probably it."

Cotton spoke, "If the Grey turned Dolf into one of those status, does not mean the other statues were alive once?"

Riza looked up, her skin prickling, "Maybe, probably, very probably. Why?"

Cotton Turned back to face the corrider they had come through, gun raised, "Do you think the Grey can reverse the process?"

Riza shuddered," Maybe, but why would it want to?"

Striker turned to face the corridor as well, gun raised, "Make one hell of a security system, wouldn't it?"

Riza grimaced, "Oh hell."

The group stod, crouched and say in silence for a moment, and then they heard the sounds; hundreds of clawing, scrambling, scurrying limbs propelling hundreds of hungry angry beings towards this final chamber.

Felix chuckled, "This doesn't end well."

The horde came charging down the corridor, and Striker and Cotton stood in the doorway firing everything in their arsenal at the onslaught of cannibal spirits, grinning priests and soldiers.

The bodies began to pile up quickly, and the Wendigo and Stillborn began scuttling over the corpses like beetles.

"Fall back, give the witches cover." Striker ordered Cotton.

Cotton nodded and backed in to the chamber once more.

Striker began firing from the second barrel of the gun and a series of explosions echoed down the corridor.

"What is she using?" Max asked in alarm.

"Grenade rounds," Cotton answered, "You two ready to do the thing?"

"I'll try, but this is basically going to be all Riza now." Felix answered.

"Can you do this solo?" Cotton asked.

Riza paused, and then nodded, "Pretty sure yeah, probably won't survive it though."

"None of the cool people are surviving," Cotton noted with a grim smile.

A cry of alarm and a sudden change of noise from exploding grenades back to gun fire caused the four to look back at Striker in time to see her being swarmed by three Hungry Ghosts, hollow blue lights glowing where their eyes should have been. Skeletal bodies wrapped around Striker and clawing at her face, one eye already torn out as she depressed the trigger on her weapon and fired into the torso of one of her attackers. The teeth of the wendigo were comically long compared the lesser Stillborn kin, and those teeth were buried in Striker's neck and midsection, jaws dislocated in impossible ways to latch on and tear flesh from bone.

"Cotton!" She gasped, "Grenade!"

"Mom!" He objected,"No!"

"Do it! Now. Block the passage way. Or this is where it ends!"

Cotton dropped his head and his shoulders slumped for a moment. The lights began to coelesce around him. Slowly drawing in.

"I need to put up a protective circle," Riza said, "We can't survive this thing paying attention to us any longer!"

Cotton pulled himself up, ripped a grenade from one of his belts and pulled the pin. He aimed right in front of his mother and the mob of monsters crawling all over her, and then threw.

The stone erupted and the corridor collapsed in a cloud of stone dust and marble slabs.

"Well, that stops them." Max muttered, "and then there were four."

"Cotton, get over here, I need everyone close to draw the circle!" Riza started to say, but her voice was suddenly drowned out by the sound of Cotton's screaming. The lights drew in to a spotlight on the teenager and in response Cotton dropped to his knees, clutching his skull in obvious agony.

"Get over here!" Riza yelled as she reached into a belt pouch and scrambled to find a piece of chalk.

In the spotlight, Cotton writhed in pain and slowly a slim ribbon of the boy's skull and scalp began to peal off from the rest of him.

In the darkness, Riza frantically began to draw a protective circle, working by feel and praying that none of the mistake she knew she must be making would get them killed.

In the spotlight, the ribbon of Cotton's skull and scalp began to peal up towards the ceiling, and more of Cotton followed in the same slim ribbon shape. The ribbon twisted and turned across Cotton's skull, slowly unravelling the boy's head as he screamed for help.

"It's downloading him and what he knows," Felix muttered, tapping on his wrist control.

"What are you doing?" Riza asked in the darkness as she finished the circle, "Max get close, this won't be big."

"I'm giving the kid some release," Felix said, and as he spoke his two remaining Grasshoppers entered the spotlight, blades out.

"You're going to kill him!" Riza said.

"You got a better idea?" Felix said.

And the grasshoppers thrust forward, neuro toxin soaked bladed penetrating Cotton's heart and spinal column. The screaming stopped, although Riza could not tell if that were due to the grasshopers or the fact the his head and neck had completely unravelled and now danced about on the marble ceiling.

"It got the kid's brain, it'll know what we're planning." Felix pointed out.

Riza pulled out her own athame blade and deftly cut open her left thumb and pressed the bloody digit into the chalk marks by feel and focused her mind on the circle. She reached into the sigils on the ground and reshaped them and the circle as she pumped as much power into the circle as she felt she could get away with using.

The chalk burst into light, glowing white in the darkness. Max and Felix were indeed inside the circle. They turned away as the last of what had once been Cotton unravelled to the ceiling and the lights moved back to spread across the room again, now noticably absent within the bounds of the circle.

"It's can't see us." Riza noted.

Max looked around, "But I bet it can see the blindspot in its vision."

As if on cue, a chill breeze whooshed into the chamber and rushed through hair and jackets.

"Should there be wind indoors?" Max asked.

"No." Riza answered.

"That doesn't feel a little cliched to anyone else?" Max asked, "A really obvious way to herald a big bad demon thing? I can't be the only one who finds that a trite sterotype?"

"Don't talk like that's a good thing," Riza answered, "Things become stereotypes because they show up in stories all the time. They become cliches because they get repeated. So if we're experiencing a really cliched sign of a scary demon's arrival, then get ready for the arrival of a Demon!"

"You should start the ritual," Feliz said.

"I really should," Riza answered.

"I'm going to read for the Book of True Revelations, try and break a hole in its defenses before we start, give Riza a fighting chance." Felix said.

"What the hell is the Book of True Revelations?" Max asked.

"A translation of the Book of Revelation, reinterpreted to show the story from the side of the Free Peoples rather than the side of the Grey." Felix answered and he pawed through his backpack.

"Who wrote that?" Max asked.

"The same people who wrote the original,"Riza answered as she positioned herself in a full lotus position in the center of the circle, "humans with a story to sell."

Felix began chanting, "Look, we are coming with the seasons, and most will never see us, for they who devoured her and all hungry peoples on earth will think they know the tale. So shall it be! We are the first and the last of the story. Without Lord or God. We stand in Mystery and speak the story..."

As Felix spoke the lights began to dance like nervous birds, flitting about the chamber.

Riza began to recite the ancestor's oath quietly to herself, "I am a child of the universe."

The ground began to tremble.

"I will never stop defending the unborn elders."

"Riza?" Max asked, pointng to the bits of rubble from the explosions, which had now began to float into the air.

"I will act brilliantly in the future, because I acted well in the past."

Rixa felt her skin grow hot to the point of boiling and felt steam begin to rise from her body as her sweat evaporated at the sudden rising temperature.

The lights where swirling in fits of panic and Riza closed her eyes to keep from becoming nauseous.

"I will never serve the Hunger." Riza found her throat going dry from the heat, and gasping as she tried to continue speaking.

Rubble began to hurtle about the room, bouncing off the protective circle and shattering against the walls and ceiling.

Felix continued reading, "Then I saw a Golden Bull, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Bull was crowned with the Sun, and its light burned those who saw it."

Lines of ghostly people appeared in the room, marching in every direction. Some wore tailored suits from the golden age now passed. Some were dressed in older clothes from previous eras. Some wore the garb of the Empire, some wore the rags of the rebellion.

"This thing's not happy!" Max yelled amidst the chaos, "Come Riza, How much more is left?"

Riza tried to speak the final line, but found her mouth to dry and her throat cracking from the heat now boiling inside her. She felt blood running from her nose, and then drying and boiling of her skin.

"Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free, hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from those who break the throne and reject the crown!' For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?”

"Riza!" Max yelled, "The next line!"

Riza took her athame, and drew it acros her lower lip, sucking down what rusty blood she could to wet her throat. And then, steam exploding from her throat as she spoke, she intoned, "I am a parent to the universe.

And with the final words, a wave of fire erupted from Riza and washed out across the room. The lights went dark and the rubble fell back to the ground. The ghostly figures vanished. And all went dark and quiet.

In the darkness Riza heard something. A voice, but not really, made her aware of words in her own mind. Moving things around inside her skull to tell her what it wished her to hear.

"You cannot do this," The voice of the Grey said, "I am inevitable. This world is chaos and disorder. Noise and light. Sound and Fury. I alone can bring order to this chaos, calm the waves of angry matter that beat against the universe's skin."

Riza Answered within her own mind, "I can do this and I shall."

"I have seen the end of the tale. It is a happy ending. I will bring us to that happy end. All tales must end."

"Our story is a circle," Riza answered, "It has no end."

"All stories end. How will you end the story of your former mate? Of your unborn child?"

Riza started at the Grey's words, but a flash of insight courtesy of the Grey's fingers in her brain showed that it was being entirely serious about her being pregnant.

"When did that happen?" Riza said aloud.

Felix coughed, "I'd guess six weeks ago when we joined the group and realized we'd be working together again. Remember the first night?"

Riza was silent a moment, and then nodded.

The grey continued, "I will give you all your happy endings if you let me give the universe a happy ending also."

"It's a bribe," Felix noted.

"It's a deal with the devil," Riza corrected, "Or worse, a deal with the demi-urge."

"What does it mean when it says a happy ending for the universe?" Max asked.

"It means heat death. Nothing left, no matter, nothing. No motion, no heat. Dead and still. It's afraid of life and motion. It wants a universe where everything is predictable and under control. And the only way to completely control something is to kill it."

Grey spoke, "But my happy ending is a long way off. Certainly longer than your life spans. And I can make your lives so very happy in the interim, just allow me to continue my work.

They said nothing.

The Grey addressed Riza, "I could give you the honor and accolades denied to you. And keep this child protected from the wilds that took the last one."

Riza said nothing.

The Grey addressed Max, "I can give you a place of honor, and find your sister's soul in the story and give her new form."

Max said nothing.

The Grey addressed Felix "You could have your wife back, and new living child. Everything you lost."

Felix flinched, and Riza recognized his expression as it changed.

"Oh hell," She muttered, "Max, Felix just cracked!

Felix scrambled, flailing towards the chalk circle.

"If he breaks the circle we're wide open!" Riza yelled.

Max grabbed Felix and the two men struggled.

Riza tried to focus her mind. But her focused danced like a water droplet on a hot iron skillet.

"We can be together Riza! We can make it work this time!" Felix yelled as he grappled with Max.

Riza wavered, "It didn't work last time Felix. It would work this time. The story rolls forward, it doesn't stand still."

"I'll make it!" Felix yelled, and began punching in commands on his wrist control.

"Max! He's going for the Grasshoppers!" Riza yelled, too late. The drones impaled Max with terrifying speed, punching poined blades through his face from both sides.

"And that's why we can't make it work!" Riza yelled.

Felix stood up and using a foot, scuffed the protective circle. Riza felt the energy escape like air from a balloon. The lights poured in and surrounded her.

"No!" Felix yelled, "You promised we could be together."

"You shall," The grey answered as Riza found herself in a spotlight in the dark, "As I promised. You shall experience no other reality forever more. But she has not made the same agreement. She must be put in order."

Riza felt it start to happen. bits of her skin pulling off and dripping upwards into the ceiling, and then she noticed the fingers of her left hand unravelling in delicate ribbons of skin, streamers floating upwards. She shifted her weight and noticed her feet had both already hardened to marble.

"You aren't taking chances are you?" She said, "But you're still going to get what you deserve."

"You lack the necessary essence to power any ritual of value."

"No," Riza corrected, "I just don't have the essence to power a ritual and come out of it in one piece! And you've made that irrelevant anyway!"

She jammed the blade of her athame into her throat and drew the blade across to the other side, uncertain if she'd hit the big arteries on both sides, but knowing she'd hit something.

The problem, Riza knew, with using ones self as a sacrifice, is that focusing a spell or ritual was particularly hard when one was dealling with the effects of sever blood loss and major organ trauma.

Her vision was warping, and her whole left arm had unravelled and was now lazilly drifting to the ceiling. Her lower torso had completely hardened to marble. She couldn't see from her right eye, and although she could still see from her right eye, the ange suggested that the eye had drifted loose from its socket and was pointing at a random corner of the roof.

She focused what was left of her mind, using what they had discovered about the Grey and its origins, creating a link. And then, as her consciousness faded, she reached out to the Grey's mind, still touching hers and poured all that was left of her, aura and avatar and everything else into the link, tearing open a hole and making the link manifest.

The chamber echoed with an audible and unsettling pop.

All of the lights went suddenly dark.

And into the silence, Felix spoke, "Riza?"

silence answered his words.

"Riza?" He asked again.

Silence continued the conversation.

"Max?"

In desperation he reached out his mind to seek the consciousness of the Grey, "Can you hear me?"

Silence.

And then.

"She did it. It's gone!"

but then.

"And so is she."

Further silence.

"And I'm not getting out of this chamber. Shrine nothing. This is my tomb."

Far away in a very different darkness a very different sort of mind unfurled into the expanding void. Previously cramped and constrained by the crush of matter, the mind now expanded in the absolute zero extending into the infinite in all directions.

The mind blossomed in the eternal darkness. The mind felt calm for the first time in a very long time. No longer bumping into the atoms that had previously bombarded the mind, were no absent. And the mind noticed this lack of bombardment, the lack of atoms, the lack of matter, and motion and heat. The lack of pressure and noise and disorder was gratefully received by the name.

The mind explored the darkness, and found it familiar. The mind remembered the space that it now occupied. The mind had been occupied this space before. It been here before.

No. More than that.

It had begun here.

And now, it had returned.

The mind knew. The meat things had not harmed it. The things of matter had not sought to destroy it. The loud and angry collections of atoms had done something that had completely astounded the mind. The terrifying beings of motion and heat that the mind had tried desperately to keep contained and controlled, they had done something that the mind had been completely unable to anticipate.

The meaty, sweaty, noisy, vibrating, boiling ball of motion had done the impossible. They had done the unimaginable.

The meat things had sent the mind home.

The mind did not understand. The things of matter and motion were chaos and disorder incarnate. They added to the disorder. They did not decrease disorder. And yet. And yet. The mind was home. It did not understand.

The mind relaxed, and reached out. And in the darkness, the mind felt the presence of others, other minds like itself. The mind recognized the other minds, they were the mind of its progenitors.

These were its progenitors and it was home.